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Prosecution of Media for Leaks Urged

NSA Director Cites Intelligence Setbacks, Criticizes Reagan Officials

By Molly Moore
Washington Post Staff Writer

The chief of the National Security Agency, complaining that damaging news leaks have dealt his intelligence operations increasing setbacks in recent years, yesterday said he has recommended that the federal government prosecute news organizations that reveal certain intelligence details.

NSA director, Army Lt. Gen. William E. Odom, also criticized Reagan administration officials for leaking sensitive information to the news media, saying that the administration has been responsible for far more leaks than Congress. In recent months, some administration officials have criticized Congress for allegedly jeopardizing national security by leaking information.

"I don't want to blame any particular area for leaking," said Odom, who added, "There's leaking from Congress . . . there's more leaking in the administration because it's bigger. I'm just stuck with the consequences of it."

"Leaks have damaged the [communications intelligence] system more in the past three to four years than in a long, long time," Odom said in a rare public forum with defense reporters yesterday.

The NSA—based at Fort Meade, Md., near Columbia—is considered the most secretive of U.S. intelligence operations. It focuses on intercepting telephone, radio, satellite and other types of communications worldwide with a vast network of high-technology eavesdropping devices.

Odom said that, because of leaks, his operation had suffered "just deadly losses" in its ability to gather Libyan intelligence.

Last year Reagan administration officials revealed that because Libyan diplomatic messages had been intercepted and decoded the United States learned Libya had instigated the bombing of a West Berlin nightclub. That information prompted the United States to retaliate by bombing Libyan targets in April 1986.

Some officials say they think this



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revelation prompted Libya to change its codes. But Odom declined to say specifically it was the revelations about the nightclub bombing that damaged NSA's Libyan intelligence gathering.

Pressed by reporters, he refused to specify any instance in which leaks had interfered with intelligence work. "You just have to take my word that that's the way it looks from where we sit," Odom said.

Odom said he has encouraged the administration to use an obscure 1950 law that prohibits disclosures of "communications intelligence." Odom said he has referred several cases involving news leaks to the

Justice Department since 1985 but said the department has declined to prosecute any of them. The department said it has not prosecuted any so far.

The NSA director said the law narrowly defines the areas for prosecution as those involving "communications intelligence," the type of intelligence-gathering most commonly done by his agency.

"Generally, when I'm with a group of journalists, I can usually look at the group and see two or three people who fall into the category of those who probably could be successfully prosecuted," Odom told the reporters.

Last year Odom and other top government officials threatened to prosecute The Washington Post if it published certain details about the damage to national security that resulted from espionage activities of former NSA employee Ronald W. Pelton. The newspaper agreed to delete about 150 words from an article as a result of concerns expressed by Odom and then CIA Director William J. Casey.

Odom and Casey, who died this year, also "cautioned" reporters covering the Pelton trial "against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial."

Odom also said that he thinks that public debate over arms-verification procedures should be limited, saying that public discussion of the details could hamper the NSA's efforts to verify Soviet compliance in the future.

"The more enlightened the specific debate, the lower my capabilities will be to verify [Soviet compliance with nuclear agreements]," Odom said.

He declined to comment on how severely NSA's intelligence gathering has been hurt by setbacks in the U.S. space program. No spy satellites have been launched successfully since the space shuttle Challenger exploded in January 1986.

Satellites are a critical component of NSA's intelligence gathering. The setbacks to the space program are "not helping us," Odom said.